

advertising photography

a straightforward guide
to a complex industry

by lou lesko
with bobbi lane

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*For my dad, Big Lou; my mom, "G;"
and Michael DiMartini, the one who
gave me my break and showed me what
the word "flawless" means.*

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About the Author

At 18 years old, Lou Lesko taped two 8x10 prints into a PeeChee school folder and walked into the top modeling agency in San Francisco. Looking to start his fashion career, he handed the “portfolio” over for review. Three minutes later he was back in the elevator, going down. Too ignorant to realize the uproarious laughter from the booking room really wasn't a positive thing, he naively kept going back with new images until he caught a break.

Under the guidance of one of the toughest agents in the industry, Lou started his career shooting model tests until he was accepted at the University of Southern California. In 1989 he completed a double major in English and a minor in Art History. After graduation, he decided to try his skills as a photo-journalist. Blind luck, good timing, and a bad hangover contributed to Lou landing an assignment that took him to Russia as part of *Montage*, a bold project to publish a magazine in both countries, in both languages. The first periodical of its kind ever attempted, it was based out of Novosti Press in Moscow. Addicted to assignment work that took him to far off places, Lou continued on with photo-journalism for two more years, until he realized he was well traveled, but broke.

Lou eventually landed back in San Francisco where he rekindled his fashion career. Fresh with the experience of his travels, he wanted to bring a more editorial, story-telling, style to his fashion work (an extravagant way of saying he didn't have the cash for a studio and this style could be shot on location in natural

light). Always looking upward, Lou moved back to Los Angeles in 1992 in pursuit of more fashion and commercial work. He felt that the Los Angeles market, while extremely daunting, would provide a good test of his abilities. Ultimately, it provided a few really lean years. Just when he thought he couldn't eat another cheap burrito, Lou caught a break with a regional Countrywide Mortgage ad that went national. As his work evolved, Lou found himself shooting for more commercial clients like Honda, Quest Communications, AT&T, and Microsoft. Looking to diversify, he took advantage of his proximity to Hollywood and managed to get his work on sets of movies and television shows. Lou broke new ground with his directorial debut of a breast cancer awareness public service announcement in 2000. Lurking around in the TV circles, his slightly frenzied personality got him an incredibly brief appearance on MTV as a photographer. This successful debut earned him a spot on other TV shows, including a featured story on his behind-the-scenes style that appeared on NBC.

As his exposure became more widespread, he attracted the interest of *Digital Photo Pro* magazine. His honest and irreverent writing style earned him a position as a regular contributor. He continues on his quest for the perfect white buttondown shirt in the meanwhile continuing to shoot, write, and cause as much mayhem as possible.

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Introduction

In 22 years of this business, I have seen one constant. Everyone has a strong opinion about how to become a successful photographer. There are therefore many conflicting ideas about how best to set up a photography business.

The notion that there is one correct way to make a living as a photographer is ludicrous. Success relies on your talent, your ability to understand and maximize the assets that you possess, and a little bit of luck. Things like personality, motivation, and the ability to be resourceful also don't hurt.

Not surprisingly, the road to success is different for everyone. If you don't believe me, look at the two most notable pioneers in the digital age, Steve Jobs and Bill Gates. One became an icon by starting in the garage of his father's suburban house in Silicon Valley before it was called Silicon Valley, and the other became successful by camping out in a hotel room in New Mexico. Both have vastly different personalities. If you asked either one of them whether they were going to be successful, the answer would have been yes. But they truly didn't have any idea of the magnitude of success that they were both racing toward.

The one common attribute of every success story is passion. Loving what you're doing will always propel you to the next level. But it's not easy. There's a lot of crap to deal with and a lot of politics to endure. There is also a bizarre need to sabotage yourself. The idea that work will magically fall from the sky

because you showed your book to a few art directors is commonplace, but it can be your career's death knell.

When I was 19 years old, the first real model with whom I ever worked was a girl named Jenny Mourning. We became fast friends and had a curious propensity to "one up" each other financially. The rules of the game were simple. Whoever could run up a more expensive American Express charge and still make the requisite payment on the due date won. Running up our totals manifested itself as fabulous lunches and trips to Macys department store in San Francisco. As the bill due date approached, it was mad dash to find work. If you forfeited your payment and let your card go past due, rendering it useless for future purchases, you were disqualified.

On the upside, this game taught me how to be resourceful in finding work quickly. On the downside, it established an incredibly dangerous precedent in how to handle the provisional windfalls of cash inherent with this industry.

I have been close to getting a real job three times in my career. Once was when I was young and broke from traveling. The other two times were because I mismanaged my money. Now, before you look at me and say, "that will never happen to me," think about how you've never received a check big enough to make you temporarily insane.

Cash windfalls carry with them a bizarre allure. You want to spend the bucks quickly because, in some respects, you deserve to. This is an intense business that requires a lot of hard work. But when you finally get a fat payday, it is justifiable to say that you earned every penny of it and you have a right to do what you want with the money.

Cash windfalls also result in an enormous rush of confidence. In a highly insecure business, these huge checks can feel a bit like drugs. Making a nice dose of cash feels pretty good. The problem is that it leads you to believe that you can do it again and again without much effort. With confidence like that, how could you not be a superstar?

In your mother's eyes, you will always be a superstar. Unfortunately, that doesn't pay. The rest of the world will laude you for your epic moments and then quickly forget about you when you're in a creative slump. The bizarre truth is that you need a healthy ego to believe in yourself against the odds so you can move ahead, but you can't have too large of an ego because it will become an anchor around your neck.

The phrase "You're only as good as your last photograph" is only half true. You're only as good as your last photograph *and* your last public action. This is a world of talent *and* politics. Some people you'll encounter will gossip about you because of something you did, or someone you're dating, or just because they don't like your personality. Others will butter you up to take advantage of you. Personally, I adore you and your choice of reading material, provided that you've actually purchased this book and aren't reading this in the aisles of the bookstore.

There is a lot more to becoming successful in this business than taking a few meetings and telling 20 people, including your favorite bartender, that you're a photographer. There are a lot of mistakes you need to avoid that are bad for business. The most important thing to remember as you read this book is that I'm not talking to you from the mountaintop. Personally I have done more things to screw myself than anyone else I know. I've had phases of blatant stupidity, unconscionable arrogance, and just flat out laziness. As you read the following pages, keep in mind that the advice is born from surviving the mistakes.

The firsthand knowledge from the other side of the fence, the agency's side, comes from personal experience, and perhaps more importantly, from the people who work there. It's amazing what you can find out when you buy someone enough drinks. Even for me, at this stage of the game, I learned things I didn't know from some unbelievably candid friends who work at some of the biggest agencies in the world. I am incredibly grateful to them all for sharing their honest advice and insight.

Peeking behind the curtain to gain an understanding of what happens to your portfolio when you send it to an agency has the benefit of making the process seem less intimidating. It also serves to help allay any fears that pop up when you haven't heard from anyone for a long time.

One of my career-defining moments was when I saw the proof sheet from a shoot of a famous photographer whom I admire. I discovered that he took as many bad shots as I did in order to capture a good one. It diminished some of the self-doubt I was having, and imbued me with a splash of confidence that took me to the next level of my career. In a business as isolated as ours, it's nice to know you're not the only one going through what

you're going through. In that same spirit, I invited 13 photographers to share their path to their fabulously successful careers. There are no two stories alike, reinforcing the point that there is no one correct path or method to success. Along with their stories, they were kind enough to donate the usage rights of their images to be printed in the book. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

The photography work that you'll see in the "Spotlight Shooters" sections at the end of each chapter represents some brilliant work, but it also represents a level of success that is attainable. I hate to employ a cliché here, but somehow, after reading the stories of the other photographers, it seems appropriate to say that all great journeys begin with the first step. In other words, we all have to start somewhere.

The intent of this book is to help photographers gain a better understanding of the joys and sorrows of advertising photography and to help such photographers prepare to be good at it. In these pages is essential information to aide you in your success.

My goal is to help you with the business aspects so you can focus on your creativity, because that is what makes you, you.

This is not gospel. It is a compendium of experiences and smart practices. How you apply them to your own life and career is up to you. I have no doubt that some of you reading this book will probably be some of the people I will be competing against for my next job.

It's no secret that I'm not an enormous fan of photographers who act as if the enormity of their success is a result of being touched by the hand of God. If you're reading this now, it's reasonable to assume that someone besides your parents has taken notice of your ability to shoot. That means you have a better than average shot at making it as an advertising photographer. All that remains is figuring out how to navigate the complexity of an industry that seemingly makes no sense. After reading this book, you'll come to realize that this industry really does not make any sense, but that's okay, because it's a cool way to make a living!

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1

Getting Started

Getting started as an advertising photographer is sort of like dating for the first time. Everyone has advice—no one's advice is similar to anyone else's advice, leaving you more confused than you were before you asked anyone's advice.

The reason for the disparity is that everyone's path to any sort of success in advertising photography is different. So where does this leave you? Pretty much in the same spot as every other successful photographer on the planet.

Like dating and sex, photography should be on your mind all the time. This business is insanely competitive, so if you aren't ready to live, eat, and breathe photography, you should look into another profession. But please don't take this book back to the bookstore; I need the money.

There are three absolutes to always remember as you break into this industry:

- ◆ Where you are now is no different than the place that every other successful photographer was when he or she started out.
- ◆ There is more advice about becoming successful than there is water in the ocean. It's okay to disregard most of it, especially if it conflicts with your instincts.
- ◆ No one will hire you unless they know you exist.



Figure 1.1
Getting started

Getting an Education and Finding Your Genre

Thankfully, the basic laws of photography remain steadfastly in place amid the torrent of technology that has defined the new era of image making. I can still pick up a digital camera, set the ISO at 200, set the f-stop at 16, the shutter at 200 and go out in bright daylight and come up with a decently exposed image.

Sadly, understanding the basic exposure law won't take you as far as it used to. The days of getting work simply because you know the technology are over. As the digital age has brought an extraordinary transformation to our business, it has also convinced the average Joe that they can do what we do. They can't. The definition of professional photographer embodies cutting edge knowledge of the technology, a singular creative vision, an understanding of the final use of the image, and a profit-driven mindset.

I was an early adopter of digital. I think it's one of the most brilliant evolutionary leaps that this industry has ever seen. But being an early adopter meant lots of screw-ups. Our first year as a digital shop saw a few re-shoots that we excused away by hiding behind the "hey it's cutting edge technology" curtain. Fortunately, the clients we were working with were as bemused as we were about all the digital stuff.

That brief period of understanding has passed, and the digital photographic marketplace has evolved to a point where clients have very little patience for technological ignorance. Educational photography programs have become exceedingly important to improve your odds of success in this field. Photography schools also offer a brilliant way to aide you in finding what genre of photography you would like to focus on, while simultaneously providing a safety net for you to fall into should your initial attempts not go as planned.

Please keep this in mind when looking for a school. Your choice of institution should merit the same thought and attention that a burgeoning doctor gives to his or her choice of medical school. Laugh it up if you want. But the success of any vocation is extremely dependent on the quality of the foundation of the education.

These are the things you need to look for in a strong photography school:

- ◆ A well-rounded curriculum that teaches you more than just photography.
- ◆ A school that has completely invested in digital and other contemporary technology.
- ◆ A school that has a good reputation that attracts students who are smarter and more talented than you.
- ◆ A school that has a reputation for having fun; this is college after all.

As you'll see as you read further in this book, becoming successful in this business requires a lot more than just knowing how to shoot pictures and run a computer. Investing in a broad liberal arts education is probably one of the best things you can do to stack the odds in your favor of success.

Teaching students how to shoot film and how to print in a darkroom has a lot of merit for creating a foundation of photographic theory and how light works. But the other half is learning digital. Yes, there are some photographers who are enormously successful and famous and who shoot film. But that film world is losing ground rapidly and will soon become a purist hobby. The industry is based on a digital standard. You have to know how to capture, process, post-produce, and transfer your images digitally by the time you get out of school. If you find a school that doesn't offer an extensive digital education, look elsewhere.

There are a lot of awesome photography schools in the United States. Two of my favorite programs are at Art Center in Pasadena, California, under the Chairmanship of Dennis Keeley and Everard Williams, and the photography program at Seattle Central Community College under the instruction of Robbie Milne.

Art Center is a private art school, and the program at Seattle is in a public community college. Both programs are brilliant. The work coming out of both schools is strong enough that I am often looking over my shoulder for some of the graduates racing up through the industry.

In a discussion with Dennis Keeley at Art Center, I asked him why someone should go to school to learn photography. He very passionately responded that “technique by itself is useless.” At Art Center, they push a conceptual component with their technical classes and a technical component with their conceptual classes. Art Center also has a fantastic Letters, Arts, and Sciences program that is advocated along with the student’s chosen artistic discipline. Art Center teaches their curriculum with an eye on a professional conclusion. This is why I love the school. They have a genuine interest in what you do after you graduate. For the time they have you, it’s not going to be easy. As Mr. Keeley likes to put it, the school is hard to get in and hard to get out.

Another brilliant photography program lives on the campus of Seattle Central Community College. They were the first school that I ever spoke publicly at. As I was walking through the computer lab areas toward the studio where I was speaking, I distinctly remember looking at the student work on the walls wondering what was I going to tell them. The work was really solid.

My discussion with Robbie Milne revealed an incredibly forward thinking real-world program. Don’t be fooled by the location in

a public college. There’s a waiting list to get into the program about a year, so those who finally get started have had a while to think about it—the ones who show up are committed. It is a lock-step program, meaning that you can only take the two year program. Those looking for a quick Photoshop class are not admitted.

Robbie’s program requires participants to purchase state-of-the-art gear before starting classes. Once students are in, they are immediately exposed to healthy competition.

“First year students get involved with second year students, acting as assistants. Each year we take the entire program to an island in San Juan for a week-long shoot. It is the last push for students close to graduating. Second year students shoot, first year students assist. By doing this, the first year students always seem determined the following year to do better. We find that this type of activity naturally raises the bar and expectations each year.”

Both Art Center and the program at SCCC stress a major business component combined with an atmosphere that allows students to evolve their interest through experimentation. It is a brilliant balance of art and commerce or making it in the real world as an bankable artist.

If you’re starting to get the idea that this photography school is tough, you’re right. Whatever school you look at should give you the same queasy feeling that you’re going to get your fan kicked.

I know I’m asking for the impossible here, but try not to make your entire educational experience about coffee and cigarette

The two programs I mention here along with many more across the country offer amazing insight by instructors who make their living from shooting. Listen to them, at least partially. They're proffering the tools and experiences that will give you an edge in a competitive field.

Whether you choose a private or public school, be discerning about where you go. It's your time and your money. Your expectation should be that the photography program will offer you the same technology to work with that industry is using in the real world. And the school should absolutely offer educational diversity that includes a Letters, Arts, and Sciences program. In this industry there are a lot of smart people. You are required to bring more to the table than an ability to shoot. Compelling ideas and the ability to craft a visual story come from other disciplines beyond photography itself.

I'm Just Working Here to Pay My Bills

Here's the reality about starting out as a photographer. Until you start making real money shooting, you are going to have to pay your bills through another means. The thing to remember is this. If anyone asks you what you do for a living, tell him or her you're a photographer. Do not tell them that you are working as a restaurant server, but you're really a photographer.

A good friend of mine, Randy Evans, is a working actor in Los Angeles. He also works as a bartender. I see Randy on television all the time, and I know from talking to him that he gets a good amount of work acting. I asked him why he still tends bar. He told me that he has found a comfortable lifestyle. He has a nice place to live and he drives a fabulous car. Some days his acting gigs provide enough for that lifestyle, some days they don't. And until his acting gigs are consistent enough to take care of all of his financial needs, which includes saving money, he's happy to

bartend a flexible night schedule and focus on expanding his acting career during the day.

If you ask him what he does for a living, even when he's behind the bar mixing drinks, his only response is "I'm an actor." He doesn't make any excuses about being behind the bar and certainly doesn't care what people think. He knows exactly who he is and what he wants. Most importantly, if you ask to see his reel (a video portfolio of his acting work), he'll have it to you in 15 minutes, without any disclaimers like, "It needs some work." It's just what it is.

Another friend. A model. Makes a wonderful money doing print work and commercials. She also works as a bartender. Her life is organized such that she takes all the money she makes as a model and puts it in the bank toward the down payment on a house. She uses her bar-tending money to live on. I never even knew she tended bar until I walked into her restaurant by accident. When she was on my set as a model, she never spoke about bartending. And yet when I saw her behind the bar, she didn't get embarrassed, nor did she make any excuses.

So from this moment forward, I really don't care how many espressos you pulled this morning—you're a photographer.

Where to Work Until You're Really Working

So where do you work until you get your career going? That's a question of personal choice. You need to really think about how you want to live your life while you're building your photography career. But please do give the choice some thought. You always want to be on a path of self sufficiency as a working photographer. That should always loom large in your mind's eye. I'll give you a few scenarios for how you can get started.

Working as a Photographer

There is a lot of work out there for people who know how to shoot a camera and move a mouse around Adobe Photoshop. The work won't pay very well, but it will pay. Model testing, event photography, couples looking for affordable wedding photography, and the one that helped me survive my lean times—head shots. It's a large list that will require you to do a bit of marketing and hustling. It will also require you to deal with the frustration of not getting paid very well and to tolerate annoying clients who have no idea the value that you're delivering them.

Working in a Rental House

The folks who work in rental houses are the unsung heroes of this business. They work their butts off and they know the scoop about the latest gear that is hitting the market. If you're a person who wants to learn a lot about all the gear that's available, working at a rental house could be for you. Rental house employment also has the fantastic advantage of free or extremely cheap access to photo equipment that you might be able to use to shoot the new photos for your portfolio. Also, after paying some dues working behind the counter, you're still going to be connected for any future rentals that you need.

Just do me favor. If you work with a group of people renting camera stuff, and you find your big break before the others do, don't go back and gloat. When you're starting your career, you're just a few lost gigs or an economy shift from ending up right back behind the counter. Always, always respect where you come from.

Working in a Lab

Consider free prints, access to high-end computers, and lots of experience in a digital post production workflow. Learning the post-production process as intimately as you would in a lab gives you a marketable skill beyond just being able to shoot. If you translate that the right way, you can add a lot of value to your photography career. I mean, I can do a few things with Photoshop, but I hire out my major post work almost all the time, typically to a person who used to work at a lab and is now on their own getting a few shooting gigs, but also augmenting their income with post-production work.

Assisting

This is going sound stupid. But not having been exposed to formal photographic education, I had no idea that assisting another photographer was even an option. Right after I graduated from college, I embarked on a stint as a photo journalist. After two years, I was well travelled and desperately broke. I wanted to get back into my commercial fashion career applying my photo journalistic experiences. Truth was, I couldn't afford a cup of coffee let alone the money needed to build a portfolio.

I answered an ad for a sales person at a place called The Image Bank, the stock photography house before they were bought up by Corbis. Their Los Angeles offices were in an old mansion on Wilshire boulevard. As I was walking into the offices, I had a side step a car shoot that was taking advantage of the gorgeous exterior of the structure.

My interview went fabulously well, but The Image Bank people were looking for a one-year commitment, whereas I only wanted to give them six months. We agreed that I would consider their offer over the weekend and talk the following week. On my way out, a shortish guy with long blonde surfer hair and a cigar started screaming at me.

David LeBon, a well known and highly successful car photographer, motioned me over and asked what I was doing. I told him I was a photographer and that I was applying for a job. He took a look at my portfolio and looked at me nonchalantly and asked “Why don’t you just assist?”

A week later, I declined the sales position and became low man on the totem pole at the LeBon studios. Because the work was on a per-project basis, I had the freedom and time to build my own portfolio while still making enough money to live. I also learned a lot about running a photography business because car shoots are big complicated productions with big money. Some days I worked for free in the offices cleaning out desk drawers and other low-brow tasks on the condition that I could ask any question I wanted about how the business was run. I left after about nine months to get back into the fashion world, only to come back one year later looking for work because I got my butt handed to me by the recession of 1990. My second tenure was for only about six months, just enough time to pay my bills and save enough money to re-ignite my career.

Assisting is a good gig if you find the right photographer. LeBon let his assistants do a lot of the hands-on work, which turned into a great training experience. I always advocate trying to get work with photographers who are shooting a lot or are shooting big production stuff. The more complicated the shoot you’re assisting with, the more you’re going to learn about running your own business.

Just be careful. Assisting can pay really well when you’re at an agency when you need the bucks. If you’re not careful, you run the risk of assisting all the time and never building your own career. That is called the assistant trap. Avoid it by keeping an exit strategy in mind.

Getting into the Zone

In this business, confidence is king. The only way to carry yourself confidently is to shoot, shoot, and shoot some more. If you take two photographers, each with equal knowledge and natural skill, the one who has shot the most will always win. They’ve done it. They’ve clicked the shutter a thousand more times and solved a thousand more problems in their head. Building up your own confidence is the only way to convince a client that you can do a job that actually is way over your head.

And that’s essentially how you start your career, by getting a job that’s over your head. I’m not talking about technically over your head: I’m assuming that if you’re reading this you’re probably pretty fabulous at shooting pictures. I’m talking about taking your gear and your skills out into the real world. I know you can shoot, you know you can shoot, but what about those people who write the checks?

Successfully delivering a job that is way over your head gets you to the next rung on the ladder. Successfully dodging a screw up and delivering a job that’s way over your head gets you up three rungs on the ladder. And so the process goes. The more jobs you nail and deliver (doesn’t matter how big the job is), the more you’ll build your confidence.

It's Okay If They Don't Like You, As Long As They Don't Hate You

We live in an industry that is 80 percent rejection. I can't tell you how many portfolios I've submitted that were tossed like six-day-old Chinese food. The insidious thing is that you never know whether it was the work or the fact that the viewer is having a bad day. With exception of a few gems, most of the criticism you'll hear will be hurtful and useless. Sadly, you have to expose yourself to the useless crap to find the gems that can transform your career. All these assaults will turn your ego into an anchor. All that confidence you had two minutes ago, gone. I can't tell you how fun it is to be a photographer and get your butt kicked by the industry that you love. It's downright depressing. Combine that with a lull in work, and you'll find yourself in the middle of a period of creative depression. Clouds of self-doubt will start to follow you around like really annoying friends who are visiting from out of town. You'll shoot less stuff for yourself. You'll panic, cry, and want to buy more equipment that you can't afford in the hopes of shaking your malaise. Your significant other, family, and friends will be driven crazy by the amount of free time you have to "chat."

During these dark periods, there are a few things you should absolutely avoid. Don't spend money. I don't care how much room you have on your credit cards. When you're down, your practical business skills are at their lowest and your powers of justifying stupid ideas are brilliant. Don't call clients trying to find work. Send them an email or a new promo. Anything that doesn't involve your voice or human contact. Have you ever picked up the phone and known instantly something was wrong with the person on the other end of the line? This is what I'm saying. On the other hand, if one of your emails or promos solic-

its a phone call to you, the excitement of the attention and the potential for work will naturally transform your voice and attitude into something positive.

Above all, never let them see you bleed. When you're in a lull and bummed out, keep yourself pulled together in public. The industry only has sympathy for the physically dying. If you're just having a spot of bad luck, you'll be avoided like a leper. Get your butt out of bed and into the daylight. Take a shower and dress like you would on a great day. Everyone knows when the industry is slow, but if you're seen as having it together, at least your appearance, people will be attracted to that. And, for gosh sakes, don't go wearing your heart on your sleeve. If you want to talk about how depressed you are, drive your significant other, family, and friends crazy. Because believe me you'll have a lot of free time to "chat."

Inevitably, as soon as you put your first name on an application for a job at a cafe, your cell phone will ring with a gig on the other end. These are the good times. Working. That little pang of anxiety that you get when you're about to start shooting. I live for that. It's a feeling you never outgrow. Then there's the indescribable feeling you get when a job goes smoothly and it's in the can (for those born after 1983, "in the can" is the same as on the hard drive; it's an historical term). It also really pumps up your confidence. After the job is over, take a day off and blow a couple of bucks on dinner. But don't wait for that feeling to drift away. Now is the time to go look for more work, shoot some stuff for your book, and interact with the advertising community. Successfully completing a job and having a couple of bucks in the bank looks better on you than a Patek Philippe watch. Your creative juices are flying, and you're ready to take on anything

Just make sure you don't get too carried away. All this confidence can and will make you cocky. This can be good and bad. The key is in understanding yourself and being aware of the effect you're having on people.

Getting Noticed

The compulsive urge to panic while waiting for your next job should be recognized as a medical condition. Many times over the last 20 years I've found myself on the verge of a complete breakdown, spending huge money on promos, emails, and sourcebooks, trying to figure out the magic bullet for getting noticed by the ad agency art buyers and art directors—the people with the work. There were times when resources ran low, and the whole effort seemed overwhelming. And then, out of the blue, often on the very day I'd be using the same coffee filter for the third time, I'd get a phone call.

“Hey, Lou, I'm looking at your promo, and I think you'd be perfect for this ad campaign.”

Bravado firmly restored, I'd confidently walk over to the blue sedan parked outside my house and tell the nice gentlemen from American Express to return to their office. I'm working again!

There are a dazzling number of theories about what goes on behind closed doors in selecting a photographer for the next big ad campaign. Some say voodoo, others say sex. My ex-agent says sourcebooks, phone calls, and cocktails.

This section is about the naked truth: What happens on the other side. Why an art buyer will suddenly pick up the phone and say the magic words, “We'd love to see your book.”

To get to the nitty gritty, I spoke with eight art buyers and art directors from the East Coast, West Coast, and heartland of the

U.S., all of whom were exceptionally candid and helpful. Not once did I encounter any attitude or hear a cross word about photographers. In fact, just the opposite. I learned that if you're a good person who works hard and has some talent, you're going to get booked; if you're a jerk and exceptionally talented, you probably still get booked, but people will talk about you; and if you're nice and exceptionally talented, you'll get invited to top agency Christmas parties. Most importantly, if no one knows you exist, I'll take that cappuccino with whole milk if you please.

Combined, the industry people I interviewed represent billions of dollars in global advertising campaigns. They see the work of hundreds upon hundreds of photographers a year. And yet the possibility of getting in the door is better than you think. I asked for absolute honesty, and they asked not to be directly quoted. Some of their revelations are truly surprising.

I'm No Picasso, But Do You Like It?

Annie Ross, the Art Services manager for RPA (think Honda), is holding a ruler. I'm reverting to my Catholic school instincts and hiding my hands under my thighs. She stands the ruler at its end on the desk and points to the 5-inch mark. This is the height of the pile of promos she receives every day. Across town, Jigisha Bouverat from Chiat/Day (think Different) is looking at a similarly sized pile that has just arrived on her desk. They are two of the busiest art buyers in the industry, and during the course of the day, they will take the time to look at each art every promo in their respective piles. Many of the images won't survive the brief audition. But the ones that do will end up in a file, waiting for a job that matches the photographer's style. Truly exceptional images will end up on hallowed ground, tacked to the wall of the art buyer's office.

Once I walked into an art buyer's office and saw one of my promos on her wall. I was thrilled. In some ways it was more exciting than seeing one of my photos in a national magazine. Oddly, the design was about as simple as it gets: an image, my logo, and my Web address. After years of getting my graphic designer friends drunk and begging them to produce a promo, the one that makes it on the wall is the one that took me an hour to bang out in Photoshop, which you can see in the following figure.



Figure 1.2 The simple promo that worked.

So what makes a really great promo? The universal response is: great work. Ultimately, the decision to hold onto your piece is completely subjective. There is no magic layout that will give your promo sticking power. That being said, framing your photography with a nice bit of graphic design can be an effective way to create some familiarity. One art director said that one of her favorite shooters has been using the same promo layout for years.

She likes it because it's recognizable, and she always looks forward to seeing his latest work.

Promos with multiple images are also well received, especially if they're a campaign of photos. It shows that you're consistent with your work. And if you assign yourself a series and then use it in a promo, you'll be delivering the message that you can handle shooting an entire ad campaign. Just don't make your layout too jam-packed; it's a fine line between versatile and crowded.

I Am a Very Fabulous Photographer

Avoid the urge to convert your magazine covers and ads into promos. No one in this industry is going to be impressed that you've shot an ad before. Moreover, if an art director hates the design surrounding your image, you may be considered guilty by association. If your photography is strong, they will know you can shoot. Keep it all about you.

Just for the record, I come from an editorial background. When I started segueing into commercial agency work, I used my magazine covers as promos all the time. I called it the "aren't I fabulous" phase. Never got one call. Fortunately, no one looked at those promos long enough to remember my name. And, as much as I'd like to say that switching to straight images was a conscious decision, it wasn't. I just ran out of covers to show.

I'll Get Better, I Swear

One of the fears I had when I was starting out had to do with artistic growth. My skill and style were always getting better. What I loved yesterday, I hated today. That's the nature of being a photographer. So I was always concerned about the work I sent out in my promos. There were days when I wanted to call everyone on my mailing list to explain that I was so much better than that tired rag I had sent them last week. The truth is, no one

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